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ABSTRACT

Research into writing anxiety is an off-shoot of research into oral communication anxiety. At first, researchers thought that people with high oral communication anxiety tended to compensate by writing. However, when the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test was used, it was found that the link between oral and written anxiety did not exist. The usual definition of writing anxiety is "a general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individual to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing" (Daly and Miller, 1975). Estimates of the percentage of anxious writers in the population are approximately the same as for anxious speakers--about 10 to 25 percent. One of the most frequent clues that a person is suffering from writing anxiety is that writing tasks or assignments are late or non-existent. Recent research is leading to the conclusion that anxiety is not the real culprit behind poor writing but is only a component of a negative attitude about writing. Writing may be improved by a change in the perceptions of the teacher/evaluator about writing attitudes. One of the ways to counteract writing anxiety is to improve the skills of the writer. Writing skills improvement courses in schools and work settings should be taught in nontraditional ways and evaluation by teachers should be reduced, substituting peer or self-evaluation when possible. (KC)

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WRITING ANXIETY - BARRIER TO SUCCESS

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WRITING ANXIETY--BARRIER TO SUCCESS

Writing anxiety appears to have developed as an offshoot of research into oral communication anxiety. Early research examined "stage fright," but subsequent studies looked at communication apprehension in broader settings with less specific behaviors. The consensual definition used for oral communication anxiety is "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977). Oral communication anxiety is extremely prevalent. One recent survey found that public speaking was the most common fear among Americans (McCroskey, 1977). Researchers have also found that fear of oral communication can affect seat choice in meetings, housing choice, amounts of interpersonal interactions and self-disclosure, and even degrees of trust in what other people communicate.

In conjunction with this research was one researcher's suggestion that people with high oral communication anxiety tended to compensate by writing. However, it was 1975 when the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test was devised, and until then, no satisfactory measurement tool for writing anxiety had been available. Using this questionnaire, researchers found that the compensatory

link between oral and written anxiety did not exist; as a matter of fact, there was a real correlation between levels of oral communication and of written communication (McCroskey, 1977). From this point, the body of literature about writing anxiety evolved.

The usual definition of writing anxiety is "characterized by a general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individual to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing" (Daly and Miller, 1975). The students, trainees, or workers who are having their writing evaluated, whether with an actual letter grade or by a supervisor's opinion, illustrate the crucial aspect of the definition--"potential for evaluation." Since writing, whether an in-class essay or a memo about absenteeism, is a personal form of communication, it is difficult for the writer to separate examination of the writing from examination of the person. Therefore--anxiety.

Estimates of the percentage of anxious writers in the population are approximately the same as for anxious speakers--about ten to twenty-five percent (Bloom, 1980). Since they are relatively common, how does one recognize anxious writers? One of the most frequent clues is that writing tasks or assignments are late or non-existent. In the workplace the person having the assignment will do almost anything to avoid writing--communicate by phone or in person or

delegate the task. Assignments that are completed frequently have little valuable information either because they are too short or they are too long and wordy. In classroom situations (without secretaries to make corrections) written assignments by anxious writers may have many cross-outs or erasures. Often these cross-outs are at the beginning of the writing because anxiety makes it difficult for the writer to get started. One researcher (Daly, 1979) found that males had more writing anxiety than females probably because, throughout school, teachers had stereotyped males as being worse writers. In formal educational settings, composition teachers have been found to discriminate in favor of well-defined paragraphs, neatness, and length. Often this form of discrimination favors females.

More recent research is leading to the conclusion that anxiety is not the real culprit behind poor writing but is only a component of a negative attitude about writing. Since writing requires such a personal effort, a positive attitude about writing leads to more practice which develops better writers. Conversely, if anxiety about writing or evaluation contributes to strengthening an existing negative attitude about writing, then strategies to lessen anxiety to improve writing will not solve the problem. Research is beginning to indicate that writing can be improved by a change in the perceptions of the teacher/evaluator about writing attitudes instead of trying to

lessen anxiety (Gay, 1983).

The need for written communication permeates society in the classroom, in the business community, and in the political and diplomatic forums. Other segments of society also need written communication. For example, ties to family and friends are weakened because people "don't like to write" and find it too expensive to telephone. As written communication needs become greater and more obvious, society places greater pressures on those who are enmeshed in the problem of writing anxiety whether as victims, teachers, business managers, or education administrators. All contributing members of society have written communication responsibilities whether those be newsy letters to friends, business letters finalizing deals, or diplomatic communiques. If effective writing is sabotaged even subtly by attitudinal problems, the losses in reduced production, reader confusion, inexact reports, and unfulfilled ambitions may be irreparable.

If the problem of poor written communication is indeed caused by writing anxiety as a component of a negative attitude, then the time has come for "the buck to stop." Our adult learners and workers of this generation come from a different educational background and have different academic preparation than those adults of forty years ago. Today's adult students may come from schools with less structured

curricula which give many more options to students about which courses to take (Cross, 1971). Additionally, negative attitudes about writing may be passed through successive family generations because children tend to imitate their parents. It seems possible that negative attitudes about writing may even affect the teachers of writing themselves. Wherever we as adult educators encounter the problem of poor writing in our classes or in our trainees or employees, we need to be prepared to attempt to overcome the negative attitudes about writing that may have been building up for a person's entire educational career, not even counting non-academic experiences.

One of the proven successful ways of counteracting writing anxiety is improving the skills of the writer. It is logical that people would be more anxious about doing things which will be evaluated if they feel they don't do those things well. Many adult workers don't recognize a problem until it faces them--as with a report to the manager. Then, if they have a low perception of their writing abilities based on their earlier academic English courses, this particular writing assignment would be difficult for the worker. Perhaps the need exists in our schools and workplaces for writing skill improvement courses. In the workplace, depending upon the necessity for written communication, skill improvement courses could

have the impact of released time for attendance or be an extra time requirement.

Skill improvement could be more appealing to students if the methods departed markedly from the traditional "writing-class" methods of lecture or read--write--evaluate, lecture or read--write--evaluate. As adult learners they may have developed their negative attitudes about writing from this teaching method. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that adult learners, whether in the classroom or the workplace, respond to a more practical, problem-oriented teaching method. Their skills improvement could be individualized which would address the frequent complaint of having to do unnecessary work. Writing assignments could be based on the actual writing tasks encountered in the workplace; assignments could be based on more common types of reading such as newspaper editorials rather than the traditional classic essayists usually used. Evaluations could be done by peers or by the writers themselves following guidelines established by the teacher. From the viewpoint of instructors/evaluators, lessening the mountains of papers that student writers produce would be welcome. Other methods of evaluation than instructor evaluation would help the teacher work load as well as being more useful to the student by removing the "mystery" about where grades come from. The student could see from

his/her own paper as well as other student papers what the points of evaluation are and why this effort does or does not meet those points.

A final suggestion to lessen writing anxiety or to improve a negative writing attitude is to give the situation recognition as a legitimate problem. The ability to talk about a problem relieves much of the anxiety associated with it. Perhaps even the awareness that the problem has a name and is fairly common would relieve anxiety for some people. The previous statements provide some benefit to the victims of writing anxiety, but to the supervisor or manager or teacher who must deal with the late assignments, discussions alerting them to the symptoms and causes of the problem may help them be more sympathetic. This, in turn, may help to lessen some of the writer's anxiety. Recognition and acceptance are the first steps to solving any problem. From this stage, the victims of writing anxiety and the supervisors who encounter it can work together to deal with the problem. The bad news is that there is probably no cure,only improvement; the good news is that the victim will be able to live a normal life.

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Directions: Below are a series of statements about writing. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by circling whether you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are uncertain, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree with the statement. While some of these statements may seem repetitious, take your time and try to be as honest as possible.

		SA	A	U	D	SD
1.	I avoid writing.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I have no fear of my writing being evaluated.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I look forward to writing down my ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I am afraid of writing essays when I know they will be evaluated.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Taking a composition course is a very frightening experience.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Handing in a composition makes me feel good.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on a composition.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I like to write my ideas down.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I like to have my friends read what I have written.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I'm nervous about writing.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	People seem to enjoy what I write.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	I enjoy writing.	1	2	3	4	5
16.	I never seem to be able to clearly write down my ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	Writing is a lot of fun.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	I expect to do poorly in composition classes even before I enter them.	1	2	3	4	5
19.	I like seeing my thoughts on paper.	1	2	3	4	5
20.	Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.	1	2	3	4	5
21.	I have a terrible time organizing my ideas in a composition course.	1	2	3	4	5
22.	When I hand in a composition, I know I'm going to do poorly.	1	2	3	4	5
23.	It's easy for me to write good compositions.	1	2	3	4	5
24.	I don't think I write as well as most other people.	1	2	3	4	5
25.	I don't like my compositions to be evaluated.	1	2	3	4	5
26.	I'm no good at writing.	1	2	3	4	5

QUESTIONNAIRE SCORING

Positive Statements		Negative Statements	
1.	_____	2.	_____
4.	_____	3.	_____
5.	_____	6.	_____
7.	_____	9.	_____
8.	_____	10.	_____
13.	_____	11.	_____
16.	_____	12.	_____
18.	_____	14.	_____
21.	_____	15.	_____
22.	_____	17.	_____
24.	_____	19.	_____
25.	_____	20.	_____
26.	_____	23.	_____

PT = _____ NT = _____

(positive total) (negative total)

BL = 78
(base level)

FORMULA:

WA = (PT - NT) + BL